

The London Conference on Critical Thought, 30 June 2012

Critical Indifference in the Aesthetics and Politics of Simon Critchley

James Corby

Those of you who are familiar with Simon Critchley's work will know that he is fond of saying that philosophy begins not in wonder, but in disappointment. Well, I guess the same could be said of this paper. I've followed Critchley's work with interest over the years but reading his most recent book, *The Faith of the Faithless*, I felt that his attempted appropriation of the affordances of faith, particularly as understood by heretical medieval Christianity in particular, in order to motivate secular political commitment, creates more problems than it solves. *Faith of the Faithless* is clearly a transition book—the move towards religious discourse and tradition is a move away from an interest in poetry that previously, in works such as *Things Merely Are*, his book on Wallace Stevens, he had tended to foreground; Critchley no doubt wouldn't see it like that, but there is a definite shift of interest; this sense of transition can also be understood as part of a gradual and as yet incomplete drift away from his earlier affinities with the work of Levinas and Derrida, towards people like Agamben and, most notably, Badiou—a move typical of the recent trajectory of theory away from the perceived negativity of poststructuralism and its various aftermaths, towards more affirmationist—often vitalist—philosophies pushing back against biopolitical forces (Benjamin Noys' *The Persistence of the Negative* is particularly insightful on this).

The argument that I am going to outline today is, very simply, that what I perceive to be the key shortcomings of Critchley's recent 'experiments in political theology' could perhaps be resolved by redirecting the political focus of his work back towards poetry and developing in a more nuanced manner the idea of aesthetic indifference.

I take this to be, fundamentally, a question of critical distance. As I see it there are three types of space or distance that Critchley has endorsed and attempted to develop in a way that is structurally constitutive of his philosophy. These three spaces can be understood broadly as poetic space, political space and religious space.

Poetic space is, simply, that space opened up by reading what I would characterise as post-romantic poetry, or by the phenomenological experience of post-romantic art more generally (Heidegger influence).

Political space is what Critchley calls ‘interstitial distance’; it is in this antinomic space, at a distance from law, that politics can happen (Agamben influence).

And, thirdly, there is religious space. For Critchley, this is pre-eminently an invaginated inner/outer space created by hollowing out the self in an act of self-annihilation (mystical anarchism / Badiou?).

All three spaces imply distance; the question, I suggest, is whether such distance can be understood in any sense as critical. To try to answer that, I’d now like to look more closely at how these various spaces are constituted.

Poetic Space

Critchley sets out his ideas about poetry at length in his 2005 book on Wallace Stevens, *Things Merely Are*. What he finds valuable about reading certain kinds of poetry—and Stevens’ verse is taken to be exemplary in this regard—is that it affords an experience of space, distance and calm, and it does this by acquainting us with the mereness of things existing in our finitudinal orbit. He writes:

Stevens’s poetry can teach a certain disposition of calm, an insight into things that comes from having them in sight. Stevens can teach a thoughtfulness in

the face of things and encourage a certain humility and nobility. In the face of overwhelming pressure of a reality defined by the noise of war and ever-enlarging incoherence of information, the cultivation of such a disposition might allow us, in Stevens's words, to press back against that pressure of reality with the power of poetic imagination and keep open the precious space of reflection.

The value of poetry, then, is that it opens a space at a remove from the pressures of everyday life, and from that space we can, with a new-found sense of calm, push back against the world and perhaps even imagine it poetically transfigured.

There is something intriguingly Epicurean about this. One of the central tenets of Epicurus' tetrapharmakons, or four-part cure, calls for an unfrightened acknowledgement that we will die. This, Epicurus believed, would give rise to *ataraxia*, a sort of calm, tranquil imperturbability that might similarly be understood in terms of opening up a space at a remove from the claims, cares and anxieties of the everyday world. Thus, Critchley seems to be offering poetry as inducing an experience of indifference in relation to the world, a sort of death-in-life distantiation in which that which had claimed our attention ceases to matter (or to matter as much), and the noise and distractions of life are quietened and stilled. There is the muted suggestion in *TMA* that this experience of poetry can open onto the political. So, the experience of distantiated calm is 'thoughtful', not 'thoughtless' (88? 89?), it is an 'experience of the world as meditation', but—and this is 'crucial' writes Critchley—'[s]uch meditation ... does not shut its eyes to things, to the dark and bloody violence of the world, trying to imagine another world'. Although Critchley doesn't really elaborate further on this in *TMA*, the suggestion seems to be that insofar as poetry can

effect minimal felt variations in our experience of the world—a local and slight transfiguring—it can be understood as having political import without it being simply reducible to a political function. Poetry, in other words, does not simply open a distantiated space, it establishes critical distance, opening up a space removed from the everyday world, inducing a sort of calm, meditative clarity that casts an indifferent eye on the incessant pressure to submit, react, enjoy, care, desire, and so forth.

More recently, however, Critchley appears to have lost faith in this account of poetry's critical potential, and has suggested that he is revising his views on poetry in light of the increasingly political direction of his work. He seems to be uneasy about the relative apoliticism of TMA, implying that he is sceptical about whether such poetic distance is indeed critical. For instance, in a footnote in his 2007 work, *Infinitely Demanding*, he expresses the wish to pursue how poetry and politics can work complementarily together, and imagines the 'poeticopolitical' task of constructing a 'supreme fiction', 'a fiction of the absolute that we know to be a fiction and yet believe in nonetheless'. More directly, he says: 'I would like to imagine the possibility of reading Stevens's poetry politically, which is something I all-to-studiously avoided in TMA.'

In *The Faith of the Faithless*, published this year, Critchley's critical distance from his work on poetry has increased further still. Again in a footnote, he writes: 'I wrote a book on Stevens a few years ago ... and, based on conversations with Alain Badiou, I have been pondering the possible political implications of poetry, which are notably absent from that book, whose concerns are epistemological' (261).

In *The Faith of the Faithless* the sort of aesthetic withdrawal favoured in TMA is dismissed as ineffectual resignation, or 'passive nihilism', motivated by the sort of pessimistic determinism preached by John Gray. Critchley writes:

At the core of Gray's work is a defense of the ideal of contemplation over action, the *bios theoretikos* of Aristotle or the *ataraxia* of the Epicureans, the state of calm and tranquillity of soul where we simply learn to see the mystery as such and do not seek to unveil it in order find some deeper purpose within. [...] Few things give more refined intellectual pleasure than backing oneself into an impregnably defended conceptual cul-de-sac. Such is what Nietzsche called 'European Buddhism'. John Gray is the Schopenhauerian European Buddhist of our age.

'The passive nihilist' Critchley goes on, 'looks at the world with a certain highly cultivated detachment and finds it meaningless. Rather than trying to act in the world, which is pointless, the passive nihilist withdraws to a safe contemplative distance and cultivates his aesthetic sensibility by pursuing the pleasures of lyric poetry, yogic flying, bird-watching, gardening, or, as was the case with the aged Rousseau, botany'. The mention of lyric poetry here is quite startling. What had previously been praised about poetry—its ability to cultivate a calm, ataraxic indifference that pushes back against the world—is now a danger to be avoided, a tempting but invidious aesthetic withdrawal that defers action indefinitely. 'In a world that is rushing to destroy itself through capitalist exploitation or military crusades', Critchley writes, 'the passive nihilist withdraws to an island where the mystery of existence can be seen for what it is without distilling it into a meaning'. This latter claim is particularly interesting, I think. Although it is being presented as negative, there is still the suggestion that the passive nihilist experience of poetry—the experience of calm contemplation and withdrawal—discloses the world, offering a clearer perspective, or a critical distance, that shows us the world as it is. The fault of this experience seems to be that the critical distance it offers does not resolve into

interpretation and, thus, action—it continues to hold things in suspended, poetic, indifferent animation.

Political Space

In becoming sceptical about the calm, distantiated space of poetry, Critchley seeks other ways of establishing critical distance, and focuses upon thinking about the kind of political space that would allow this. This is interesting because despite what I take to be his disavowal of poetic withdrawal, in *The Faith of the Faithless* Critchley is still clearly very sympathetic to the potential of radical forms of secession and detachment. The difference now, however, is that this manner of establishing distance through secession, indifference, withdrawal and so on must have a strong critical potential and for this to be so, the implication runs, they must be interpreted primarily as acts rather than as states or conditions. Even then, however, there is a worry about how easily accommodated and thus ineffectual such acts—and the politics of secession more generally—might be.

This ambivalence is brought out most clearly in his discussion of the Tarnac Nine and associated groups that go under names such as Tiquun, the Invisible Committee and the Imaginary Party. Influenced by Agamben, the Tarnac Nine [refer to the Tarnac Nine or to *L'Insurrection qui vient?*] organised itself on principles of secession, disengagement and desertion, attempting to cultivate an anonymity, opacity and invisibility [FF, 12] in relation to the state on the belief that this is the only way of opening up a space not wholly traversed by law. The idea here—directly influenced by Agamben—is that what survives the separation of law and life is the question of community, and thus, arguably, politics itself [see Simon, 148]. As Agamben puts it in *State of Exception*, ‘To show law in its nonrelation to life and life in its nonrelation

to law means to open a space between them for human action, which once claimed for itself the name of “politics”. The resulting communities are envisaged in Blanchotian terms as ‘inoperative’ or ‘*désœuvrée*’, and are considered more likely to develop and be sustainable in the country rather than in urban areas which are often widely exposed to systematic surveillance.

Despite a clear sympathy for this kind of politics of secession, Critchley fears that it risks abstraction. This is a rather ironic danger given the aims of such a politics, but it only reinforces the notion that cultivating opacity and invisibility in the manner advocated can only be considered a critical act if that invisibility is at some level visible—and even then, as I have suggested, and as Critchley fears, it is a rather limited gesture that lacks the wherewithal to mediate and promote alternative political subjectivities [quotes]. More generally, displays of disengagement are liable to accusations of ineffectual moral exhibitionism, or what Žižek calls a kind of ‘moralising supplement’ or ‘pseudo-activity’.

This is not to say that Critchley completely renounces the ideal of opening up and cultivating a distantiated communal space radically indifferent to the bio-political infringements of the state. On the contrary, he suggests that to give up this ideal of a heterogeneous or antinomic space would be to rule out from the beginning any sort of utopian impulse, abandoning ourselves to the world as it is (151-1). The problem with the desire for secession, as he sees it, is that it abandons the world as it is rather than seeking to improve it, and it does so based on the vague idea—motivated more by hope than expectation—that a radically different world—a ‘blessed alien land’ (202) might be possible. Critchley’s alternative, and one of the main moves of his recent work on politics—both in *Infinitely Demanding* and *The Faith of the Faithless*—is to develop the concept of ‘interstitial distance’, his interpretation of political space in

which critical distance is achieved. Acknowledging the influence of Badiou, Critchley comments in *Infinitely Demanding* ‘I think that politics should be conceived at a *distance* from the state. Or, better, politics is the praxis of taking up distance with regard to the state, working independently of the state, working in a situation’ (112). ‘Resistance’, he says later in the book, ‘is about the articulation of distance, the creation of space or spaces of distance from the state’. However, as he puts it in *The Faith of the Faithless*, rejecting the common Agamben-inspired politics of resistance’, ‘We need a richer political cartography than the opposition between the city and the country’. For distance to be critical, for it to be more than a merely gestural act, one must fully rid oneself of any mistaken idea that one can simply step outside of the state to challenge and resist it. Interstitial distance, as Critchley conceives of it, would be ‘distance from the state [...] *within* the state’ (113). It would, in other words, be the opening up of a distantiated communal space from the inside, which would facilitate ‘the construction of new political subjectivities’ (112). Fine sentiments perhaps, but how is interstitial distance different from the indifference to the state characteristic of all forms of the politics of secession?

Religious Space

[unedited]

Although it is not fully developed, Critchley seems to indicate that what separates his politics of interstitial distance from the calculated withdrawal of the Invisible Committee is ‘love’. Love, he implies, would offer a way of thinking about political engagement that would avoid the tendency to abstraction of the politics of secession and would keep alive the utopian impulse of radical politics.

This, it seems to me, is a crucial step in Critchley's argument and yet it is one that is woefully underdeveloped. To reiterate: FF seems to capture Critchley negotiating, sometimes rather awkwardly, a tempering of his longstanding commitment to a philosophy of finitude and the aesthetic pathos associated with that, which always risks passivity and abstraction, with a more affirmationist stance oriented by an antinomic vitalism that provides the conditions for ethical political activity.

What promises to reconcile the tensions in Critchley's thought between activity and passivity, self-emptying indifference and commitment, incapacity and agency, indebtedness and self-authoring, distantiated, solitary contemplation and close, communal praxis, is a politics of love, which he positions as influenced by what he calls mystical anarchism, which constitutes another type of distantiated space. This religious space seems to supersede the poetic space I outlined earlier. Critchley derives his ideas about mystical anarchism from ideas associated with the Medieval 'Movement of the Free Spirit'.

Critchley focuses on the writings of Marguerite Porete, who explains that it is only through the extinction of the will and annihilation of the soul—a violent self-evisceration that leaves one “‘free of all things’” (128-9)—that one creates the space within oneself, by reducing oneself to nothing, for God's love to enter. It is only through love, ‘an act of absolute spiritual daring’, that the self welcomes a passivity or indifference ‘whereby the self becomes annihilated’ (130). There is thus a ‘cultivation of an experience of passivity and an *askesis* of submission’ (136), but that submission marks a transformation from a desiring subject into God—‘When I become nothing, I become God’ (130), Critchley writes, summarising the implications of Porete's teachings, and the consequences are broadly communist: ‘In the annihilation of the

Soul, mine becomes thine, I become though, and the no-place of the Soul becomes the space of the activity of divine reflection' (133). This is 'a communism whose social bond is love' (134). Thus, for Critchley, Porete seems to offer an experience of radical indifference by means of 'self-annihilation' (143) that leads not to 'quietism or resignation' (143), but to what he calls 'mystical anarchism'. 'What is at stake here', writes Critchley, 'is the creation of new forms of life at a distance from the order of the state—which is the order of visibility—and cultivating largely invisible commonalities' (143-144 [much more on 143 about the communal aspect of all this]). Thus, Critchley's rather odd excursus about medieval heresy links up with the Tarnac 9 and the Invisible Committee. The issue common to both 'is the affirmation of a life no longer exhausted by work, cowed by law and the police' (150). It is the commitment to a politics of love that promises to save mystical anarchism from the risk of abstraction and ineffectual withdrawal that threaten the Invisible Committee's politics of secession. This politics of love is 'an act of absolute daring that opens onto what might be called the immortal dimension of the subject ... the point is not to kill others, but to kill oneself in order that a transformed relation to others becomes possible, some new way of conceiving the common and being with others' (153).

Religious Space as a Condition of Political Space

Thus the opening up of a space in what Critchley calls interstitial distance seems, at least in FF, to be dependent upon opening up of a space in the self. Only through a mystical emptying out of the self, a self-killing carried out as an act of love, a recognition of absolute impotence, can a politically potent space at a critical distance from the state emerge. Even though it is ultimately oriented towards alterity, this initial experience of radical indifference is a solitary, aesthetic, subjective experience,

which only develops out onto communal, political concerns insofar as the extinction of the self in indifference, is transformed into a communal, subjectively fluid but cohesive space radically indifferent to the state.

Critchley thus believes that he has found a way of retaining a foundational attachment to the negative (through conscience, finitude [impotence], the infinite demand etc) which doesn't lapse into the resigned, passive nihilism of someone like John Gray, but develops the notion of an indifferent, distantiated space in a way that opens onto critical political activity. Critical distance would be the consequence of religious space serving as a condition for political space.

However, returning to Critchley, without some account of agency, it is difficult to see how this theory of the formation of a revolutionary, communal subjectivity can be much more than an organic, autochthonic, quasi-pantheistic fantasy—and yet agency appears to be excluded from this process. This is not simply a question of individual agency—collective agency seems equally compromised by Critchley's account—but it is strongly rooted in individual experience insofar as it is a negative individual experience—the hollowing out of the self, self-annihilation—that is supposed to lead to an affirmative collective activity. I would like to suggest that part of the inadequacy of Critchley's account of individual agency is a consequence of him having seemingly turned away from his earlier insights into poetry. The lesson of Stevens' poetry was that the experience of poetry can unfix the apparent fixedness of the world, thus giving rise to a kind of creative liberation that allows the becalmed self to push back against the world, securing a space in which both subjectivity and the world might be re-imagined. Critchley's mystical anarchism faces two problems: (i) it is dependent on the erasure of anything that might be able to push back against the world and (ii) the consequence of this erasure is a further erasure of the division between self and world,

a sort of transformation where the self becomes world, or in the language of FF, the self becomes God. Critchley is quite clear about this. Discussing Porete's teachings, he writes: 'The logic here is impeccable: if the Soul has become nothing, then it can obviously see neither itself nor God. On the contrary, God enters into the place that I created by hewing and hacking away at myself. But that place is no longer my self. What the Soul has created is the space of its own nihilation' (129). Far from 'pushing back' against anything, Critchley speaks of 'complete submission, an economy of masochism ... an act of absolute spiritual daring that induces a passivity whereby the self becomes annihilated ... a subjective act in which the subject extinguishes itself' (130). This leaves unclear the motivation for any subsequent critical activity. Why, in other words, should this achieved distance from the state be critical? In the name of what? Bereft of history, emerging Marcion-like from an act of pure creation, on the basis of what might a collective identity emerge? Critchley suggests that Porete's mystical anarchism can be traced back to Paul's words in Galatians: 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me' (Gal. 2.20, FF 130). 'In becoming nothing', in other words, 'I become God', 'whatever sense the first-person pronoun might still have here', adds Critchley. But this, I'm suggesting, is the problem—a too-complete negation of the self, which seems to lack the calm 'thoughtfulness' of poetic space. In *Infinitely Demanding*, Critchley quotes Marx from his 1843 'Introduction' to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: '*I am nothing and I should be everything*'. 'That is', writes Critchley, 'beginning from a position of emptiness, a particular group posits the fullness of the universal and hegemonically articulates that universality in political action, thereby becoming a political subject'. But it is difficult to see how Critchley's faithful subject, annihilating itself in blind passion, would be in a position to posit

anything. Without an account of critical agency it is simply unclear how mystical anarchism can be translated into a communistic politics of love.

Supreme Fiction

In the short time that remains, I'd like to gesture towards how I think a return to the experience of poetry might offer a way of resolving this difficulty in Critchley's account of political subjectivity. Let me reiterate that Critchley himself is not adverse to steering the political back towards poetry. On the contrary, in FF he states in a footnote that he would like to pursue the idea that 'politics and poetry [may] begin to collide in a potentially fructive way', which, however, he guardedly calls a 'dim possibility'. Though he brackets this in FF, suggesting it would be a separate project, he sketches how it might be thought through: 'the poeticopolitical task', he writes, 'is the construction of a fiction, what Wallace Stevens called "the supreme fiction", namely the fiction of the absolute that we know to be a fiction and yet in which we believe nonetheless'. In other words, poetry would reveal the fictiveness or contingency of the world and the 'supreme fiction' would serve the same kind of function as the faith of the faithless: it would provide a sort of mythical story or self-abasing civil creed around which political subjectivity could form—something we could be true to, without believing it to be necessarily true, thus offering what, in FF, he calls 'the catechism of the citizen'.

This is an interesting and provocative idea, but there are two problems with it:

1. Revealing the contingency of the world, showing that the world is what you make it is flippant and doesn't explain how this insight breaks free from the cycle of reactionary response to state hegemony. What is needed, beyond the demonstration of contingency (which on its own can remain a complacent

theoretical insight lacking motivational impulse) is the experience of radical indifference. In contrast to the passions of religious self-annihilation, this would be an experience of passive, but crucially passible, poetic distantiation that would lead the subject into a process of transformative unfixing of certainties and loosening of the bonds of care and involvement. This would be an emptying of the subject without vacating it. Such indifference would lead not to a languid passive nihilism but to the forcing of a potentially radically transformative situation in which detachment, ironically perhaps, binds us every more forcefully and ethically to the world and its possibilities. The idea would be that poetry unfixes, rendering labile and mutable, but isn't a complete giving over of oneself like the religious experience of mystical anarchism. As such one might think of the poetic experience, as Blanchot, drawing on Hegel, does, as enduring death but maintaining oneself in it.

2. The second problem with Critchley's outline of the poeticopolitical task is that his rendering of the idea of the supreme fiction underestimates fiction, implying it to be simply narrative story telling; this peculiarly 19th century rendering of supreme fiction ignores Stevens' clear command that the supreme fiction must be abstract (imp. for Ranciere too). 'You must become an ignorant man again' writes Stevens in 'Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction'. It is obvious why SC would be wary of the abstract as it would lead him back to calm, distantiated poetical space that he worries is non-political. But of course this space is political precisely insofar as it is indifferent to politics. This is the lesson of Hegel, Heidegger, and most compellingly in this context the tradition of Romantic and post-romantic aesthetics stretching from Schiller to Ranciere. The critical value of fiction is not that it can offer a determinate programme

for action, but that it can suspend all such programmes, asserting instead an irreducible, undecidable ambiguity effecting, at least momentarily, an experience of indifference that radically devalues our various moral and aesthetic frames of interpretation. Recognised as such, Critchley might then want to position poetry as a kind of rite, a sort of ritualised experience of externality (achieved, *mise en abyme* through indifference) that would provide the conditions for political commitment, but not the determinate, catechistic muthos around which political subjectivity would form.